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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001018

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [ASEC](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: DAY OF SOLIDARITY EVENT CUT SHORT BY POWER FAILURE

REF: MINSK 951

MINSK 00001018 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Charge Dereck Hogan for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On September 16, youth opposition activists staged a demonstration and concert on the one-year anniversary of the first "Days of Solidarity" event. Despite significant security presence and attempts by the GOB to impede the rally, the demonstration in Minsk attracted approximately 2,500 participants. The U.S. and EU heads of mission observed the event together, and Charge took questions from independent journalists. United Democratic Forces leader Aleksandr Milinkevich spoke to the crowd and encouraged those present to engage in future street protests to overcome Belarus' dictatorship. The event ended early, however, due to an "unexplained" power outage that affected only the park where the demonstration was held. End summary.

Final Day of Solidarity Event Draws 2,500 Participants

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¶2. (C) On September 16 at 4:00 p.m., youth activists organized a GOB-sanctioned demonstration and concert called "Jeans Fest for Freedom" at the People's Friendship Park to show solidarity with political prisoners and all victims of the Lukashenko regime on the one-year anniversary of the first "Days of Solidarity" event. (Note: United Democratic Forces (UDF) leader Aleksandr Milinkevich told Charge that this would be the final Day of Solidarity event (reftel). End note.) Pictures of the four disappeared opposition activists and business leaders were displayed on the stage underneath Minsk City and EU flags. The crowd of youth, numbered at approximately 2,500, displayed signs that read "For Freedom", waived independent youth and Belarusian national flags, and later held lit candles, the original symbol of the Days of Solidarity movement. Charge and EU heads of mission (HOMs) were present to observe the event.

Milinkevich Calls for Street Protests to Bring About Change

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¶3. (U) UDF leader Milinkevich told the crowd that a dictatorship could only be overcome by street protests of large numbers of people. He encouraged those present to gather at the Minsk City Court on September 19 when the court will hear the appeal against the prison sentence for former opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. Other speakers at the demonstration included United Civic Party leader Anatoly Lebedko, opposition youth leader Nikita Sasim, and Valeriya Krasovskaya, daughter of disappeared businessman

Anatoly Krasovsky.

Unexplained Power Outage Cuts Concert Short  
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¶4. (U) The second half of the demonstration, which had turned into a concert, was cut short by an "unexplained" power outage. According to independent news source Belapan, electricity was only cut off at the site where the concert was taking place. The local district power supply office reported no electricity failures in that district and the police at the event claimed ignorance and innocence.

¶5. (C) Independent media reported that concert participants did not believe the electricity failure to be accidental. According to Belarusian National Front deputy Viktor Ivashkevich, the event organizers received permission from the GOB to hold a demonstration, but not a concert. Ivashkevich told Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff on September 15 that police verbally warned him that the demonstration would be shut down should illegal nationalistic symbols be used, including the Belarusian national flag, or if the event turned into a concert.

Security Services Ready for Action  
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¶6. (C) Belarusian security forces, including nine 40-passenger police buses, several police cars and an ambulance, gathered at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) prior to the demonstration. (Note: Event organizers originally asked for permission to stage a march from the BNAS to the Friendship Park prior to the demonstration, which the authorities had denied. End note.) The police also closed the metro and bus stops closest to the opposition rally.

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¶7. (C) During the demonstration, Poloffs observed that nine police buses, two five-ton prison vehicles, three city buses full of police, and numerous rapid response OMON personnel positioned themselves around the park. Plainclothes security forces and state media Belarusian Television (BT) videotaped attendees, including Charge and the EU HOMs who were observing the demonstration. Yet, despite the significant security presence, Poloffs did not observe any indications that violence or force had been used.

Comment  
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¶8. (C) Although the authorities officially granted permission for the demonstration, their blatant attempts to impede the event and intimidate the crowd, including closing the nearest metro stop, cutting power to the park in the middle of the concert, and staging a significant security presence, were quite obvious. Post has not received further indication from contacts whether this event was the final Day of Solidarity event. It appears that after a year of work and several months of virtual inactivity, however, the movement has finally gained some momentum, as evidenced by the freedom-themed T-shirts, buttons, stickers, and bandanas that are becoming increasingly more popular among the general public. (Note: Post will provide an overall assessment of the Days of Solidarity movement in septel. End note.) Additionally, it was encouraging to see opposition leaders and youth activists finally coordinating their efforts.  
Hogan